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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Theodore McKeldin

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Address of Governor Theodore R. McKeldin
Annual Dedication Day Gettysburg Battlefield

November 19, 1953

Fourscore and ten years ago a celebrated orator delivered a splendid oration on this spot. He was the Honorable Edward Everett, and today nobody remembers what he said, and few remember that he spoke at all. For after he had finished the presiding officer called on the President of the United States to make "a few remarks", which he did; and those few remarks were Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which the nation has carved on the marble walls of the great cenotaph in Washington because they were already carved in letters of gold on the hearts and minds of millions of Americans.

The great orator spoke from his head and his words have been swept away down the current of the years; but the great man spoke from his heart, and his words will never be forgotten. He refused to look back to the glories of the past; instead, he looked forward soberly to the responsibilities of the future. "We cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow this ground - It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work."

Lincoln revealed here the real magic of eloquence, which is never a shout of triumph, but always a challenge to action. Consider the speeches that the ages have agreed are supreme triumphs of oratory and you will find that, almost without exception, they pay little heed to the victories that have been won, but much to the battles that are impending. From Pericles calling upon Athens to turn away from the cemetery to remain the school of Greece, on down to Churchill, calling on his people to give him blood, toil, sweat and tears, they have all demanded more than they promised, they have all warned, rather than boasted. So Lincoln's words at Gettysburg are immortal because they called upon the people for a mightier effort than they had yet made, summoned them to a level of greatness they had not yet achieved.

So any man who speaks at this place on the 19th of November, and who brings to the occasion nothing but rhetoric, however splendid, is not worthy of the honor. There is only one permissible theme for a speech at

Gettysburg, and that theme is "for us, the living, to be dedicated to the unfinished work."

Ninety years after Lincoln spoke the necessity for that dedication is not less but more imperative. The unfinished work in his day was the preservation of the Union; in our day it is the preservation of western civilization. Yet basically it is the same - it is to see to it "that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

At the moment when Lincoln spoke the bloodiest war in our history was raging; at present the only war in which we are engaged is that strange development of the Twentieth Century - a cold war. But never think that the unfinished work has been simplified by that; on the contrary, it is vastly more complicated. A hot war can be won by hot lead and cold steel, which are dreadful implements, but easily understood; a cold war can be won only by fast thinking and stern endurance, both of which are hard to understand.

Across the river Elbe, in Germany, and across an imaginary line drawn through Korea our troops are indeed facing armies whose strength and intentions are not clearly known, and it is natural for us to assume that these armies constitute the menace to our world. So we are led to the inference that if we assemble the means to destroy these armies the work will be finished.

It is an error. The armies are indeed the spearhead of the threat, but only the spearhead. There would be no danger in them were it not for the driving force behind them. It is the driving force that is the real threat, and it is nothing material, it is an idea, or, rather, faith in an idea.

We have it on Divine authority that faith can remove mountains. We usually take that to mean faith in God which, of course, it does, but that is not exactly what was said. If you will look at the 21st Verse of the 21st Chapter of Matthew you will find that it reads, "if ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall say unto this mountain, be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done."

There is nothing in those words that denies that a monstrous faith may also have power; and we have seen it proved, over and over again. Communism is, in my opinion, a monstrous faith; but it is utter folly to deny that it has power, and wise men have long agreed that it is so powerful that it can be overcome only by a stronger faith.

They call this faith dialectical materialism, a barbarous term that conceals the truth of the matter. Dialectical materialism sounds like something very abstruse and scientific, but all it means is the belief that liberty is a lie, that a strong nation of freemen is an idle dream, and that the motto inscribed on our Supreme Court building in Washington, "Equal Justice Under Law" is a piece of low comedy.

To Americans this may sound like sheer insanity, but hundreds of millions of people believe it with fanatical certainty. They are people who have had no experience of liberty in their own history, and little if any knowledge of the history of free nations. They know only what they have been told, and when they have been told tremendous lies they inevitably believe in tremendous heresies.

The unfinished work to which we are dedicated is not to knock these people down, for you can't convert a fanatic by knocking him down; the unfinished work is to make these people understand the truth, and the way to ~~xxxx~~ make them understand is to let them see with their own eyes. It is likely to be a long and difficult task, but we have no right to shrink from it on that account, any more than the people who listened to Lincoln had a right to shrink from the hot war.

They must be made to see; but no man except a drunk or a madman can see what is not there to be seen. They must see that America is a free nation, and that cannot be done by any means except keeping America a free nation, so plainly and obviously free that no one can deny it. That is why the preservation of American freedom is not only a service to ourselves, but a service of the utmost importance to the rest of the world.

It is not merely keeping it free from invasion and conquest. That is important, of course. It is so important that it justifies the billions we are pouring out for national defense, the arduous training to which we are subjecting our young men, and the arduous labors of our statesmen in strengthening the bonds that unite us to our friends.

But it is not all-important. There is where some of our people are making the mistake of their lives. They have come to believe that physical safety is all important. They are ready to sacrifice all that has made America what it is if that seems necessary to ward off the blow of an armed enemy. Freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of thought, even freedom to petition for the redress of grievances they would abandon in the name of national security.

This is folly, it is suicidal folly. The true American attitude toward any such program was stated long ago by one of our national heroes. Patrick Henry asked a question and answered it in words that have been burned into our memory: "Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God!"

Even from the standpoint of ~~xxxxxx~~ security the people who would surrender liberty are defeating their own end. For they are seeing only the Red Army. They are blind to the force that drives the Red Army on. That is the force of a monstrous faith against which all their weapons are powerless, for it can be defeated only by a greater faith. If our antagonists believe more strongly in tyranny than we believe in liberty, then they are stronger than we are before you begin to count the battalions, and the men-of-war, and the flights of bombing planes that each side can summon. By reason of his unparalleled military experience, there is, perhaps, no man in the world who is as well equipped as President Eisenhower to appraise the measure of reliance that a nation can put in armaments. In a recent address, the President quoted Lincoln's words on this momentous question - momentous then and momentous now. Lincoln asked, "What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence?" Lincoln made this answer to his own question, and in our day President Eisenhower confirmed it: "It is not our

frowning battlements, our bristling seacoasts. Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere."

An armed man can stop a Communist, but he cannot stop Communism. Only a free man can do that, and he does it without striking a blow, merely by being free and showing the whole world that he is free. But it is far more important to stop Communism than to stop Communists; and as against the penetration of a false idea American freedom is a better shield than all our military power.

The men who are most careful to preserve the rights that our fathers bought for us with their blood are the men who are doing most to protect us against the malignant infection that breaks out in many forms, here as Communism, there as fascism, yonder as Nazism, but always and everywhere as death to liberty. For the man who is truly free is the envy of all the world. It has been so since the beginning of recorded history. There is no race that has not coveted freedom, no language that is not filled with its praise. It is true that in Russia and China we face cultures so different from our own that frequently we cannot understand how their minds work; but even the Russians and the Chinese are not so different that they pay no lip-service to freedom.

Indeed, they have been beguiled into their present bondage by false promises, that it is the road to eventual freedom, and the surest way to release them is to show them what real freedom is. This is to carry on the unfinished work to which Lincoln was dedicated and which is described in the motto on the old bell that rang for the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

As we consider the fighting power of ideas, it is well to remember that our treatment of racial and religious minorities is carried on always under the watchful eyes of the entire world. The genuineness of our devotion to human liberty is and will be judged by our conduct.

So, too, a chief concern of our nation today is to secure a maximum of individual liberty consistent with safeguarding liberty itself. We

face a real challenge in dealing with a small malignant element in our midst who, availing itself of our freedom, would use it to destroy freedom. The dilemma is how and where to strike a balance between personal liberty and the necessary restraints flowing from government's attempt to preserve itself and liberty. It is not easy to establish that balance, but the world will watch intently what we do in this respect and will judge our professed love of freedom according to the way we exemplify our creed in deeds.

The task of interpreting and protecting liberty is a continuing one, that repeats itself in one form or another in each generation. The work, unfinished ninety years ago, is unfinished today, and will remain unfinished

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's
great Judgment Seat,

but to carry it on, to push it a little nearer to completion was regarded by Lincoln as the highest privilege attainable by the citizens of this or any other nation.

It was to this that he summoned his own generation when he stood on this spot. It was a weary and heavy-laden generation. War had been raging for two years, years disastrous beyond anything that we have ever known. The American blood spilled in that war was more than was shed in both the gigantic wars of the twentieth century. In proportion to the numbers engaged, the casualties on both sides exceeded those in the fiercest fighting of our time. At the moment Lincoln spoke the war had been going steadily against the North, and even the miracle of Gettysburg had merely staved off utter ruin. They were heartsick, unutterably tired people to whom he spoke; and to them he addressed no word of comfort, but a ringing challenge, a summons to scale a higher peak than they had as yet surmounted.

But the effect was not to plunge them into complete despair. It was the contrary, it was an electric shock. Their hearts leaped up at the sound of that clarion, their weariness fell away when the great leader pointed to the heights ahead, and their fears vanished as they realized the greatness of the prize to be won.

I have faith to believe that the same counsel today would produce a like effect. I think we have had enough of warnings, too much about the dangers that beset us and not enough about the golden opportunity that is before us if we have eyes to see. I know that we have been subjected to tremendous strains, I know that we are carrying an appalling load, I know that we are a tired and apprehensive people. But I believe that the cure is a summons to greater effort, a challenge to grasp the nettle danger with a firmer grip, an admonition that it is not enough for us to be a strong people, that we must be a great people and in God-fearing people that is a people inspired by religious idealism, which is not the same as religious organization, but the reason for its existence.

As it was ninety years ago, so it is today - the way to safety and happiness is by the road of freedom and honor, leading by way of justice at home to faith and integrity shown to all men. And I cannot phrase it better, no man has ever phrased it better, than in those words spoken here that have been ringing through the world ever since: "that from these honored dead we take increased devotion -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

